

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 7673

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PBOR, PGOV IS, EG, JO, US, XF
SUBJECT: BEGIN PLAYS "ANSWERMAN" TOMORROW WITH HIS CABINET

1. AS THE SABBATH AFTERNOON BEFORE TOMORROW'S CABINET MEETING DRAWS TO A CLOSE, BEGIN APPEARS TO HAVE ROUNDED UP A LARGE MAJORITY OF THE CABINET BEHIND HIS OWN COMPROMISE ANSWERS TO THE NOW FAMOUS "AMERICAN QUESTIONS." RECENT ALARMS AND EXCURSIONS ABOUT AN IMMINENT CABINET CRISIS, TO BE TRIGGERED BY THIS LENGTHY STRUGGLE WITHIN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION LOOK VASTLY OVERDRAWN. BUT ONE THING IS UNDENIABLE: FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THE TENURE OF THE BEGIN GOVERNMENT, A PROFUND SOUL-SEARCHING HAS BEEN TAKING PLACE OVER FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS, AND THAT PROCESS ONCE BEGUN CANNOT EASILY BE REVERSED.

2. I TALKED YESTERDAY WITH WEIZMAN AND MINISTER OF JUSTICE SHMUEL TAMIR. WEIZMAN SAID HIS PRIVATE MEETING YESTERDAY WITH BEGIN HAD BEEN ENCOURAGING AND THAT HE WAS NOW OPTIMISTIC ABOUT A POSITIVE OUTCOME. (I TOOK HIS REMARK TO MEAN THAT HE HAS REACHED AN UNDERSTANDING WITH BEGIN ON A MODIFIED VERSION OF HIS OWN PROPOSED ANSWERS AND THAT HE SEES NO IMPELLING NEED TO BREAK RANKS SHARPLY WITH THE PRIME MINISTER.) LATER
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IN THE EVENING TAMIR CONFIRMED MY IMPRESSION THAT MOST OF THE CABINET WAS MOVING INTO LINE BEHIND BEGIN'S FORMULATION, EXCEPT FOR THE DMC MINISTERS. TAMIR SAID THAT HE AND HIS THREE DMC COLLEAGUES CONTINUED TO SUPPORT WEIZMAN'S ORIGINAL PROPOSED RESPONSE IN THE HOPE THAT WEIZMAN HIMSELF WOULD NOT WALK AWAY FROM IT. IF HE DID, THEY WOULD FORMALLY PROPOSE A SIMILAR VERSION WHICH GIVES A

CLEAR, POSITIVE ANSWER CONCERNING ISRAEL'S READINESS TO DETERMINE THE FINAL STATUS OF THE WEST BANK AND GAZA AT THE END OF THE FIVE YEAR INTERIM PERIOD. HOWEVER, TAMIR ASSUMES THE DMC WILL REMAIN IN THE MINORITY WITHIN THE CABINET, AND ACCEPTS THAT PROSPECT WITH SOME EQUANIMITY SINCE IT WILL HELP PRESERVE A FACADE OF INTERNAL DMC PARTY UNITY RATHER THAN ACCENTUATE THE THREAT OF A SPLIT IN THE DMC-KNESSET FACTION.

3. THIS HAS BEEN AN EXTRAORDINARY EPISODE. BECAUSE ALL PARTY LEADERS REALIZED THEY WERE BEGINNING TO GET DOWN TO THE REAL, ULTIMATE QUESTIONS, THERE WAS A TACIT UNDERSTANDING IN THE CABINET THAT MINISTERS WOULD BE PERMITTED TO BRIEF THE PRESS AND THEIR OWN SUPPORTERS THOROUGHLY ABOUT THE VARIOUS FORMULATIONS BEING PROPOSED, AND ABOUT THE PRECISE NATURE OF THE QUESTIONS WE HAD SUGGESTED AS WELL AS THE ANSWERS WE HAD INDICATED MIGHT BE MOST ACCEPTABLE. THIS HAS LED TO A VAST OUTPOURING OF DETAIL IN PRESS COMMENTARIES OVER THE PAST FEW DAYS. FOR EXAMPLE, JOSEPH HARIF IN FRIDAY'S MAARIV HAD A LONG ARTICLE WHICH WAS EXTRAORDINARILY ACCURATE IN PROVIDING THE PRECISE TEXT OF OUR QUESTIONS AND OF OUR SUGGESTED ANSWERS. ON BALANCE, DESPITE THE DIPLOMATIC COMPLICATIONS THE UNQUESTIONABLY PRODUCES, I BELIEVE THE OPEN DEBATE IS HEALTHY RATHER THAN UNHEALTHY. NOT ONLY THE CABINET, BUT THE OPPOSITION AND INDEED PRACTICALLY EVERYONE POLITICALLY SOPHISTICATED IN THIS COUNTRY, IS INVOLVED PSYCHOLOGICALLY IN THIS EFFORT TO COME TO GRIPS
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WITH THE MOST DIFFICULT QUESTION ISRAEL FACES: THE REAL LONG TERM FUTURE OF ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PALESTINIANS.

4. THE DEBATE, WHICH HAS NOW CONSUMED THE BETTER PART OF A MONTH, IS INEVITABLY AFFECTED BY ALL SORTS OF CROSS-CURRENTS: DOUBTS AND FEARS ABOUT BEGIN'S HEALTH, THE SCARCELY CONCEALED SUCCESSION STRUGGLE, THE FEARS AMONG DMC LEADERS THAT THEIR PARTY IS DOOMED TO EXTINCTION, THE EVER-PRESENT TEMPTATION FOR THE LIBERAL PARTY AND THE NATIONAL RELIGIOUS PARTY TO TOY WITH OTHER POSSIBLE GOVERNMENT COALITIONS WITH LABOR, THE PERSONAL INSCRUTIBILITY

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AND STRANGE POLITICAL ODYSSEY OF MOSHE DAYAN, AND A GENERALIZED INCREASING WORRY THROUGHOUT ISRAELI POLITICAL SOCIETY THAT A REAL CHANCE FOR PEACE WITH EGYPT IS SLIPPING AWAY. WE HAVE MANAGED TO AVOID BEING TAGGED WITH MORE THAN AN ABSOLUTE MINIMUM OF ACCUSATIONS OF IMPROPER INTER-FERENCE IN ISRAELI POLITICAL AFFAIRS--THANKS TO CAREFUL RESTRAINT IN STATEMENTS FROM WASHINGTON DURING THIS PERIOD AND ALSO TO THE FACT THAT WE HERE IN THE EMBASSY HAVE BEEN KEEPING OSTENTATIOUSLY AWAY FROM MAJOR POLITICAL LEADERS WHILE THEY HAVE BEEN TRYING PAINFULLY TO COM TO GRIPS WITH OUR FAMOUS QUESTIONS. THUS FAR AT LEAST THE INEVITABLE ISRAELI PARANOIA ABOUT US PRESSURE HAS BEEN REMARKABLE BY ITS ABSENCE FROM THE PUBLIC DIALOGUE IN RECENT DAYS. NOT SURPRISINGLY HOWEVER, THE STORY IS BEING SPREAD BY SOME THAT WE POSED THESE DIFFICULT QUESTIONS MERELY TO FRACTURE BEGIN'S COALITION.

5. WE WILL PROBABLY GET ANSWERS WHICH ARE POSITIVE-SOUNDING BUT LEAN HEAVILY ON VERBAL AMBIGUITIES SO THAT BEGIN CAN SATISFY HIS OWN CONSCIENCE AND NOT OVERTLY CONTRAVENE HIS DEEPEST CONVICTIONS ABOUT ISRAEL'S VALID CLAIM TO SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE WEST BANK. IN A BRIEF CONVERSATION I HAD WITH YADIN ON THURSDAY HE SUGGESTED ONE OF BEGIN'S MORE COM-CONFIDENTIAL

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PLEX DIFFICULTIES LAY WITH QUESTION TWO, IN A FORM WHICH I HAD NOT PREVIOUSLY RECOGNIZED. OUR SUGGESTION THAT THE ULTIMATE STATUS BE DETERMINED BY A PROCESS OF FOUR-PARTY NEGOTIATION, FOLLOWED BY SOME IND OF APPROVAL BY THE RESIDENTS OF THE AREAS, CLEARLY IMPLIES A VETO FOR ISRAEL IN THAT NEGOTIATION IF SATISFACTION FOR ITS SECURITY REQUIREMENTS CANNOT BE AGREED UPON. TO BEGIN, HOWEVER, ACCORDING TO YADIN, THIS FORMULATION WOULD ALSO GIVE THE OTHER PARTIES A VETO OVER ISRAEL'S HISTORIC SOVEREIGNTY CLAIM; A CLAIM WHICH HE STILL BELIEVES IS HISTORICALLY VALID AND CANNOT BE ABANDONED.

YADIM MAY BE WRONG, BUT IF NOT, THIS NAGGING CONCERN OF BEGIN'S
COULD SHAPE THE ANSWER TO QUESTION TWO IN WAYS WHICH WE
HAD NOT ANTICIPATED.

6. RABIN TOLD ME THIS MORNING ON THE TENNIS COURT THAT
HE AND EVERYONE ELSE ASSUMED THIS SET OF ANSWERS WILL
ONLY LEAD TO OUR POSING MORE QUESTIONS TO THE GOI. THIS THEME
HAS BEEN
PROMINENT IN THE CABINET DISCUSSIONS AS WELL ACCORDING
TO TAMIR. IT ENGENDERS CONSIDERABLE RELUCTANCE TO GO THE
MATTER AT THIS POINT WITH BEGIN. IT ALSO ARGUES STRONGLY
THAT WE USE WHATEVER ANSWERS WE OBTAIN WITH THE EGYPTIANS
AS PERSUASIVELY AS POSSIBLE, RATHER THAN RETURNING FOR FURTHER
CLARIFICATION TO THE ISRAELIS AS THE NEXT STEP. FROM THE
DEBATE WHICH HAS RECENTLY GONE ON, WE WILL
KNOW AS MUCH ABOUT THE ISRAELI POSITION AS THEY KNOW THEM-
SELVES BY THE TIME IT IS OVER.

7. WHATEVER HAPPENS TOMORROW, THE CAT HAS BEEN OPENLY DROPPED
AMONG THE PIGEONS HERE IN THE COURSE OF THIS EXTENDED AND
PAINFUL DEBATE. THE SEEDS OF DISSOLUTION OF BEGIN'S
COALITION HAVE BEEN PLANTED. I DO NOT BELIEVE THEY WILL
GROW TO MATURITY FOR SOME TIME, BUT THE TIME COULD BE SOONER
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THAN I HAVE PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT IF BEGIN'S PHYSICAL CONDITION
BECOMES MORE PROBLEMATIC. IN ANY CASE, NO ONE
SHOULD MISTAKE WHAT HAS BEEN GOING ON HERE AS A DELIBERATE
STALL OR PLAY FOR TIME. BEGIN AND HIS COLLEAGUES
HAVE BEEN FOR THE FIRST TIME LOOKING OVER THE PRECIPICE;
THAT THEY ARE NOT READY TO JUMP SHOULD BE NO SURPRISE.
BUT THEY FEEL THE GROUND GETTING SHAKIER
BENEATH THEIR FEET.
LEWIS

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